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## Hey, Parents. What Minecraft Is Doing to Your Kids Is Kind of Surprising.

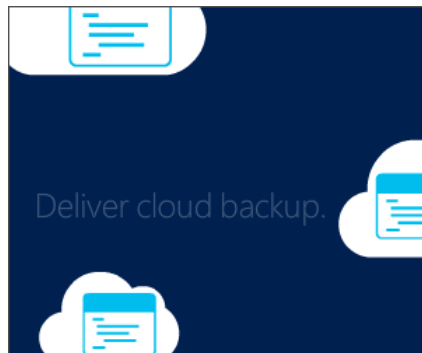
I had no idea. You won't either.

Margaret Rock in Modern Parent

**L**ove or hate Minecraft, kids obsess over it, playing huddled over iPads or eyes fixated on monitors and televisions. The premise is almost rudimentary: Minecraft is an open-ended “sandbox” game where you construct and play in elaborate worlds. Some kids recreate famous pieces of architecture, others express their creativity through grand designs, but the experience is simple: in the free-form Minecraft sandbox, you can build practically anything your imagination can think up.



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Published by [Mojang](#) in 2011, the game is one of the best-selling, independently developed games, available on [PC and Mac](#), [iOS](#) and [Android](#), and even [Xbox](#). Since Minecraft's release in 2009, over 20 million copies have been [sold](#), including [93,000 sign-ups](#) in a 24-hour peak. That's a large army of children mining resources, turning them into materials and constructing buildings and recreation spaces.

Minecraft sounds like any multi-million-dollar blockbuster, except it looks nothing like one. Graphics are boxy and sometimes blurry, and sound effects are primitive at best.

When you start, you land randomly in any number of uniquely generated terrains, from a palette of square blocks that make up deserts, mountains, prairie and even clouds. The unknown world is confusing, with no instructions and few explicit objectives. At first, that seems like a drawback, but it actually engages you to explore — first online and then off — to look for further direction on what to do next.

That's precisely what makes it so irresistible. "I definitely think Minecraft is a freak thing," Markus Persson, the game's creator, [told](#) the

New Yorker. “There’s no way you could replicate it intentionally.”



Of course, critics repeat the age-old line about video games: Minecraft is a big waste of time. But advocates see it as a clever way to teach teamwork and creativity.

While the adults bicker, I decided to speak to a handful of 5-to-13-year-olds themselves to see what they think — what they get out of it and why they love it so much — and it turns out, hearing it straight from the source explains much of why this weird, open game has them so hooked.

Kids get right to the heart of the matter when they describe Minecraft. To create buildings and items — like say, an indestructible pickaxe or a stove to cook with — from scratch, you need to gather raw materials from the world around you. As eight-year-old Mason describes to me, “you gather resources to survive.”

But surviving isn’t easy. When night falls, you retreat into your creation to hide from the mobs of monsters: spiders, zombies and skeletons, spawned to pursue you with a single-minded purpose. With sword or bow in hand, you lock up your goods and fight until daybreak when the sunlight sends them back into hiding.

There is no blood or gore, but if you don’t like the killing, you can play in “creative mode.” You also feast on hunted animals. “A butchered pig drops down meat,” 11-year-old Meg told me.



Playing Minecraft, it turns out, can teach kids creative thinking, geometry and even a bit of geology, and research shows they can learn experimentation, teamwork and problem solving skills, as well.

In fact, the Journal of Adolescent Research published a study comparing kids that played video games to those that didn't. "Video game players, regardless of gender, reported higher levels of family closeness, activity involvement, attachment to school and positive mental health," authors Paul J. C. Adachi and Teena Willoughby concluded. "Video game players also had less risky friendship networks and a more favorable self-concept."

Some schools, which understand that experimenting is an important part of learning, are taking notice, and integrating the game into classroom curriculum.

"Before Minecraft, I tried to use video games in class, but I always had to change my lesson to fit the game," Joel Levin, co-founder of TeacherGaming, a company that helps schools set up games, told the Washington Post. "Minecraft was the first game that came along where I could change the game to fit my lesson."

But like any double-edged sword, it has potential pitfalls, too.



“Someone not only killed [my son's] Minecraft avatar, but also stole all of the items in his inventory,” Beth Blecherman told to Mashable. “It’s a cruel world out there. Just like explaining to your kids why they have to safeguard their items in real-life, the lesson applies to Minecraft, too.”

Chase, a 13-years-old, told me he has heard about muggings, but in his experience, arguments never reached beyond squabbling. Players often bicker about “where to place a block or what material to use,” he said, and in an extreme case, someone put TNT on his creation and “blew it up for fun.” To avoid troublemakers, he simply plays with others who “like to play the same game I do.”

Meanwhile, the game can also rile up groups of siblings playing together. John, a 12-year-old who plays with his younger siblings Lilly and Declan, said he gets into fights with his sister, usually when he’s trying to give her a tip. But Lilly said she doesn’t need his help. “I do know a lot about the game,” she sharply replied.



Parents, rightfully, worry about the effects that video games have on a child's developing brains. Reports of a potential [link](#) between gaming and ADHD are troubling. But kids, of course, aren't so aware.

"Sometimes I need to stop playing it before I get to bed — that's when I think about what I'm going to do the next time I play," Chase said. "But overall, I think it is good for you because it helps your brain become more active since it's a thinking game."

"I also think it's addicting," Kayla added.

But for younger players, like Mason, the lessons aren't as clear in his mind. When I asked him if there were any benefits to the game, he said the biggest thing he had learned was that "you need to have a pickaxe."

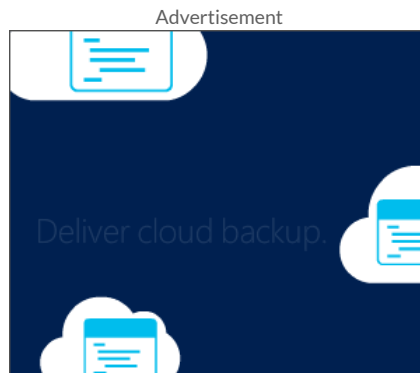
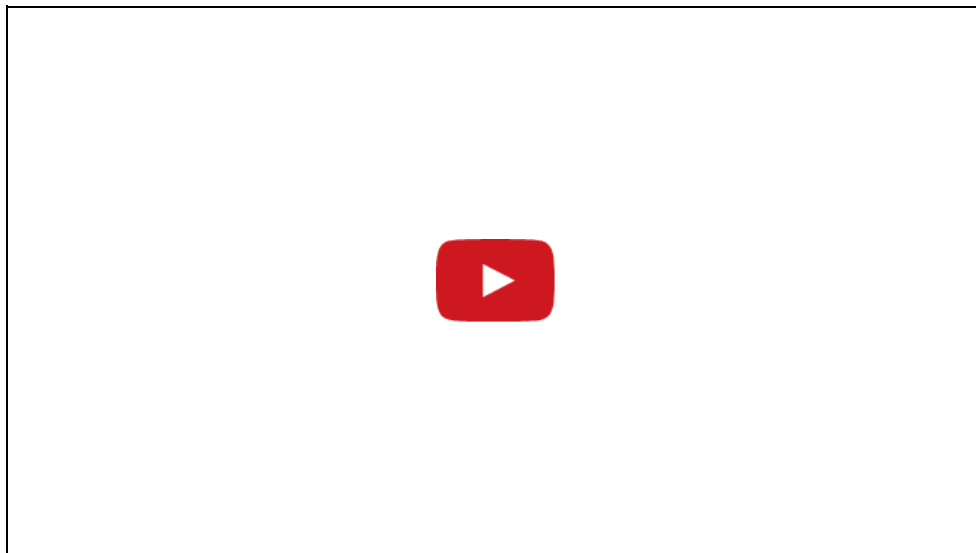


With little documentation or explicit instructions, kids get their

bearings by stumbling on sites like [Minecraft Wiki](#), where they learn to build an intricate maze of mine shafts and tunnels or that dream house. By figuring out what is possible, they also learn skills of observation and perseverance.

John said he “keeps trying new moves to learn new things.” Meanwhile, five-year-old Declan said he learns by watching his older brother. When I asked about the game, even at his young age, he rattles off all the tools, minerals, animals and metals, chomping at the bit to prove his skills.

But sometimes experimentation, websites and communities aren’t enough to solve difficult puzzles. For advanced tactics, a burgeoning YouTube scene is ready to help. Mason told me he spends nearly five hours a week watching tutorials, often chock full of technical knowledge, from video-gurus like Jordan Maron. Dubbed “[CaptainSparklez](#),” Maron doesn’t just offer commentary, he also entertains fans, carving out his own sort of stardom.

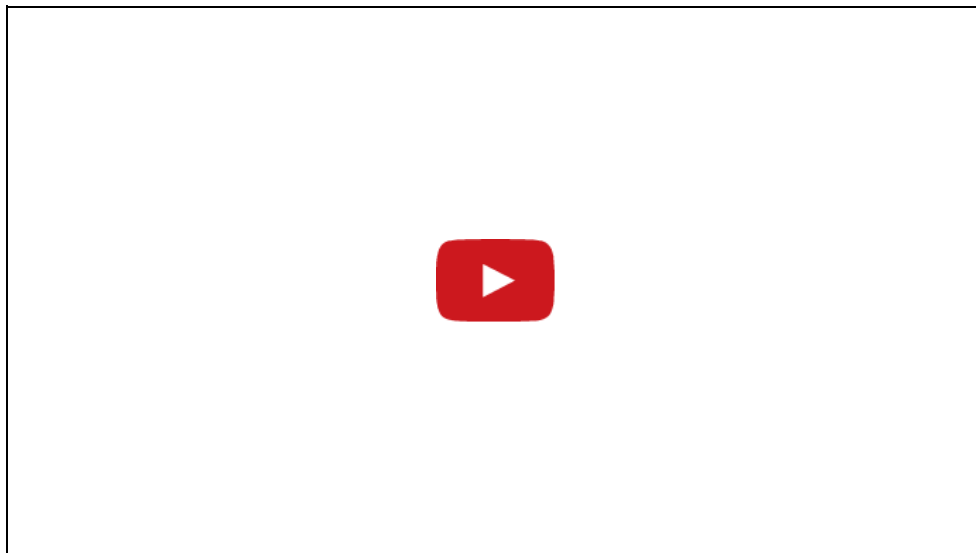


Minecraft’s success is due largely to its lack of objective — you don’t play just one mission, you choose from numerous activities. Meg, for

example, said she likes to play hide-and-seek with friends, while Chase prefers to build “really cool castles.”

Regardless of the task, teamwork is a key aspect of the experience. For seven-year-old Lilly, the thrill is in the discovery. She took pride in explaining to me how she and her brothers found a jukebox in an abandoned mineshaft, and then, exploring further down, stumbled upon a CD to play on their adventures. Meanwhile, 13-year-old Kayla, who plays only with her siblings — blocking strangers is an option — said she regularly talks to friends about the game and checks [Instagram](#) for the hashtag [#Minecraft](#) to connect with the community.

But beyond the living room, a thriving subculture allows kids to experience all things Minecraft. They gather online on [forums](#) and in the offline at [conferences](#) and [summer camps](#). They meet to connect with one another over their love of the game and collaborate on [real-world items](#).



The mystery of Minecraft’s near-hypnotic effect boils down its flexibility, engagement and community. Like most things, it can be taken to extremes. But overall, kids strategize, plan and connect with one another, learning how to set goals and work together to complete a task. Not that they would say so in those words, though.

Lilly explains the fun of constructing a castle so big that “you can build a whole lake in it.” In the end, the endless possibility that Minecraft allows is teaching kids valuable lessons in life — as long as they can

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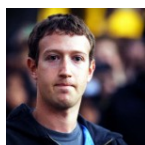
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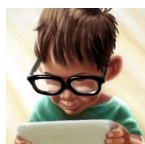


#### Modern Parent

Using technology to raise healthy, happy and well-adjusted children.

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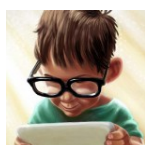
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